

## Go outside. Find an animal. Write about your encounter.

“I’m awed by animals in the natural world,” says Kimberly Sultze, explaining why this assignment appears to be one of the most popular assignments on campus. “There’s so much going on in nature that most humans aren’t paying attention to and don’t really know about. When I was growing up, time outdoors was not considered as ‘productive’ as, say, time in the lab. I wanted to develop a course that would motivate and inspire students to pay more attention to the world around them.”

One of the many perks of working at a small liberal arts college is the flexibility to create an interdisciplinary course that’s unique. In 2006, Kimberly Sultze created “Nature and Outdoor Writing,” giving

students the opportunity to explore their own experiences of the outdoors on paper.

In this class, students are given nonfiction writing assignments that are paired with photography and illustration. Students can earn credits toward the Media Studies, Journalism and Digital Arts major; the Environmental Studies major; the Creative Writing minor; and as an artistic experience requirement, so classes are often full of a diverse mix of students who each bring a different background to the discussions.

The class also reads examples of nonfiction writing and discusses important issues connected to nature and the outdoors such as nature deficit disorder, the value of silence, the natural history of creatures and landscapes,

the importance of conserving natural habitats, and screen addiction.

Sultze is a wildlife photographer with a particular interest in eye-to-eye contact with animals. She says she tries to focus on the “beyond human” world — to stare it in the face and acknowledge its right to exist. “You have to be really slow and relatively silent. In order to get quality and compelling photographs, it helps tremendously if you know something about the animal’s behavior, because then you can predict what it’s going to do next and you can follow it with the camera,” she says. It’s a time-intensive pursuit, Sultze admits, but she doesn’t mind — she’s outside, and there’s always something new to see. Using field guides helps her identify the animals she sees and in so

doing, move toward a more caring relationship with them.

Sultze also uses some of the natural sounds she and Media Studies, Journalism and Digital Arts Professor Jon Hyde have recorded and edited, like mantled howler monkeys, frogs, and birds from Central America.

“We build up inattention blindness to the natural world,” she says, adding that ever-increasing time in front of screens enforces this blindness. Getting students to really look at, identify, and convey their experiences in the outdoors reverses these effects.

“I have found that this style of writing creates a new connection, a new relationship with the outside world.

“Face to face.”

# FACE TO FACE

Kimberly Sultze, Associate Professor of  
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by Lauren Friedgen '16